With *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920*, Jackson Lears has written a sweeping account of this long half-century and in the process makes an invaluable contribution to the narrative of U.S. religious history. Lears argues Americans at all levels – from politicians and robber barons to entertainers and laborers – appropriated religious (specifically Protestant) notions of regeneration and subsequently reworked them into secularist agendas. This cultural and intellectual move began initially by focusing on the revitalization of the individual. Because of its perfectionist strain, however, the movement eventually directed its attention to the reform of the nation and concluded with an imperialist attempt to remake the world in America’s image.

At its essence, this is a history of utopian hopes and reformist yearnings. Lears locates the source of the major developments in this era in a widespread and rather religious longing for something else, for meaning, and for that which is “real.” One can trace a narrative arc here: with the American Revolution the nation was born; with the Civil War the nation was martyred; and in the ensuing decades Americans believed they could facilitate the nation’s rebirth. In a time of anxieties issuing from Reconstruction, urbanization, industrialization, and the abuses of unregulated capitalism, Americans sought out control and certainty in what they saw as a morally and intellectually confused world. More specifically, Lears maintains, Americans refashioned Joseph Schumpeter’s idea of “creative destruction” through a Messianic impulse toward salvation and redemption; that is to say, the figures Lears focuses upon believed they could only engineer a new order (a new self, nation, or world) by destroying the old one.

Thus Americans took to the gymnasium, the wilderness, and the battlefield in hopes of fusing physical, moral, and national strength. Lears views some of these efforts as admirable, if not a bit benign in the long run. For example, Populists, Christian Socialists, and others helped pave the way for commonweal plans and civil rights. Lears nevertheless holds others in this progressivist strain accountable for shaping the scientific
racism, imperialistic jingoism, and moralistic militarism responsible for many of the gravest travesties in recent history (including more current events such as the Cold War and the invasion of Iraq).

Lears, a seasoned historian and professor at Rutgers University who has been writing about the emergence of modern America for nearly four decades, comes at his primary sources (culled from magazines, letters, memoirs, novels, sermons, speeches, advertisements, and other entertainments) largely through the work of other scholars. Yet as much as one might want to dismiss this project as one of an armchair historian, reflecting back over a career of careful study, Lears not only offers a work sure to be appreciated in scholarly and popular circles alike; he is also able to bring a fresh and convincing perspective on the central role of religion in American life. In particular, Lears contends these aforementioned religious ideas pertaining to rebirth were the primary force behind American policies regarding the individual self, issues of gender, race, and class, and especially national attempts to revision the world in our image through commerce, Roosevelt-like conquest, and Wilson-like intervention.

As is perhaps to be expected with books intent on providing a coherent and unified narrative coursing throughout a given period, Lears’ frequent reiteration of his thesis can become tiresome at times. Yet the amount of detail included here, the countless number of actors and anecdotes, occasionally seems to overshadow the larger point he is trying to make. In this respect some chapters are stronger than others. On the one hand, the sixth chapter, “Liberation and Limitation” is a keen and perceptive look at how belief in a culture of abundance – of unlimited supply and perpetual growth – led to the promise of liberating renewal (sought pragmatically in the experiences science, aesthetics, and the body had to offer) as well as to the threat of a Weberian “iron cage.” This chapter easily corroborates Lears’ claim of the multiple ways in which religious concepts of being born again translated nicely into secular nodes while representing widespread anxieties about the changing order. On the other hand, chapter four, “The Country and the City,” while interesting in its study of poor farmers coming together as a public and effectual movement, does the least to support his argument. Here, Lears’ attempts to link political action with apocalyptic millennialism seem more contrived.
Of course, these are very minor nitpicks of an important work written by a historian at the top of his game. What is more, this is a scholar who “gets” religion. Unlike many historians outside the religious studies field, Lears offers satisfying descriptions and explanations of the influence religion has had on intellectual and cultural phenomena not typically viewed as religious. In short, *Rebirth of a Nation* is a refreshing study and scholars of religion will benefit from Lears’ lively suggestions.

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